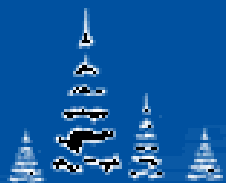
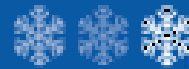


Six Secrets to Holiday Hosting



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The Essence of Entertaining

Whose life isn't incredibly complicated? Entertaining – even if to have a few friends over for a drink – often turns complicated into overwhelm. I know. I have been there more than I care to remember.

Not long after I started my business, I quickly learned I had to figure it out. People were calling for advice and were hiring me to entertain at their parties. I researched dozens of books and articles on entertaining. I spoke to countless other professionals. They all came back to the same underlying theme: Entertaining is about pleasure – both extending it, and indulging in it. Easy enough, I thought. But no one could tell me how to translate *that* into meaningful rules, principles... anything! that I could apply.

After many tries, I think I've finally gotten the formula right. It is simple and my secrets can be used by anyone for any entertaining occasion. It can be effortless to entertain. But most of all, it can be enjoyable.

Why entertain?

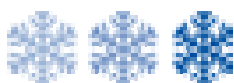
Entertaining allows us the uncensored, unadulterated right to express ourselves and extend our own brand of hospitality. It allows us to create memorable moments with family and for our friends. But this presumes, one – that you have discovered your own brand of hospitality and, two – you have the time to plan a party. We tend to forget that these are the starting points. Instead, we dive right in and try to create a party. Rather than creating a party, we create stress for ourselves, and ultimately discomfort for our guests.

The Six Secrets.

Being short on time no longer means you have to be short on style, taste or the exquisite ability to entertain in effortless and impressive ways. Entertaining is about making people feel comfortable. Even in the throes of the Holiday Season, you can discover your style, and put these simple secrets to work for you. Soon you will find yourself wanting to host parties in every season celebrating good times among family and friends.

The Six Secrets:

- * *Great parties require planning.*
- * *Choose your guest list with care.*
 - * *Do one thing less.*
- * *Use prepared foods; style them as your own.*
 - * *Prepare for the inevitable disaster.*
 - * *Arrive early; host yourself.*



Entertaining is a process.

Yes. It is that simple. This guide will help make the process easy. While we all strive for ease, simplicity should never replace what matters most: the warmth and graciousness you extend to those you welcome in. What you serve and how you've decorated is the backdrop. Whether you want it to or not, it will speak for you.

Secret #1. Great parties require planning.

There is no way around that little fact. Even the most spontaneous of gatherings, at some point, will require a moment of reflection where a plan emerges. But it can (and often should) be as simple as a *moment* of reflection. In fact, some of the most memorable events are the easiest to pull together.

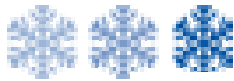
Essentially, all you need to think about is when (the date and time), and what type of food and beverage you will offer. Clearly if you're thinking "Sunday afternoon, with tea and sandwiches", the remaining elements should easily suggest themselves. Then you simply have to define the parameters around which you will entertain.

I know of no better way to do this than to close my eyes and imagine myself already at the event. What do you see? In the tea example above, are there 2 types of teas being served or 5? Are there simply sandwiches, or are light pastries served, as well? Are people dressed-up, or is it a casual affair? From here, you simply *must* trust your instincts. You have already experienced the party you want to host; now you can create it.

Secret #2. Choose your guest list with care.

Welcoming people into our homes is traditionally meant to be a joy for *our* pleasure! It is an honor to be graced by the presence of company. And, in turn, a guest is to be honored with hospitality and respect. Sadly, what begins with great anticipation often leaves us feeling that entertaining is a chore, or worse, we think of it as work. You must abandon any unpleasant thoughts around your entertaining plan. Hold on to those unpleasanties and your gathering is inevitably doomed. Instead of happy memories, you will feel a sense of relief when the party is over. At best you feel drained. At worst, you feel unfulfilled.

In essence, a successfully hosted event begins with you! You are the first, and perhaps, most important guest. A host that is happy and willing to indulge in the pleasures of their own home or space, can naturally convey a sense of comfort, an aura of relaxation and spread infectious cheer to their guests. Along with that includes the good sense to invite only the people *you* want to have at your gathering. It is a joy preparing for any occasion when you are preparing for those people you genuinely want to indulge. It simplifies things. You end up doing less, and enjoy the process more. Your guests do too.



Secret #3. Do one thing less.

With the first two pieces of your entertaining plan in place, the rest becomes easy. Knowing what you are creating and who you are creating it for makes the next question easier to answer. *Do I really need to have it all?*

Agreed. It's hard not to get caught up in the endless retail campaigns and magazine layouts that show us *how* to do more. But during the holidays, "more" is an invitation for overwhelm! Stop and ask yourself if you really need all of that food, or wine, or cocktails, or cheese, or decorations, or ... people! More often than not, more isn't going to be better. It's just going to be more.

If you've done your planning right, and your guest list is a congenial group of people, then it's easy to subtract from the whole – even if you're hosting a black-tie, gourmet dinner. Do one thing less. If you don't tell anyone what you didn't do, for sure they will not miss it!

Secret #4. Use prepared foods; style them as your own.

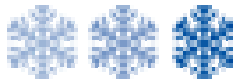
There are a multitude of specialty markets, food stores, gourmet take out services, catering houses, and well, yes even grocery stores that specialize in prepared foods. Why on earth do people venture into their kitchens during the holiday season? If all the joy and festivities are somewhere other than the kitchen, I'm hard pressed to think anyone (even those that love to cook) want to spend any more time in there than they have to.

My point is simple. Any prepared foods can be styled and presented as your own. You will save yourself time, headaches and hassles. And, if selected carefully, your guests will be treated to some magnificent nibbles and delicious fare. Here's how:

- * Remember, less is more. There's luxury in simplicity. Your housewares and your table are a canvass to express your personal style – even if it's someone else's food.
- * Do not crowd a table or a buffet with food. Spread your food service and your bar around your home. Use each space for one *type* of food service or one beverage. The idea is to use the food and the bar areas to keep people circulating throughout the space you are entertaining in.
- * Style the food. Use *dimension* to build layers of flavor and visual interest. When layering (or stacking) food, remember guests have to eat it. Layer foods while building flavor. Think *dimension* not height.
- * Use geometry to balance space and food on a plate. Offset food with side dishes or garnishes.
- * Finish every plate (even service platters) with a garnish. Use a light touch and a gentle hand; garnishes should never compete with the meal.

Perfect choices for finishing Holiday food include:

- * Herbs: whole or chopped



- * Pomegranate seeds, Mandarin orange slices or caramelized fruits
- * Chopped nuts, olives or dried fruits
- * Spices or spice blends dusted around the edges of plates
- * Dressings, sauces, aged vinegars or high quality olive or flavored oils

Secret #5. Prepare for the inevitable disaster.

You planned dinner for 6 people and suddenly you find you're entertaining 8 or 10. You are distracted from the kitchen and you burn the appetizers (or worse, dinner) to a crisp. Everyone, quite unexpectedly, has become gin drinkers and your bottle is empty before you are through cocktails. Your daughter's soccer game ended with a surprise trip to the emergency room and you return home less than 1 hour before your guests arrive. There is no way to plan for the unknown. However, with a well-stocked pantry and a Plan-B in place, you can successfully navigate any minefield of disasters.

If (or I should say when!) it happens, the only thing you can do is take a deep breath, smile and remember Secret #1. You have to make a new (but silent) plan. Do a quick assessment of what you have on hand. Get your guests out of the kitchen and occupied with cocktails, a bite of something to eat and something interesting to occupy their attention (a spouse or other guest that knows your predicament and can create a distraction while you recover is very useful in these situations).

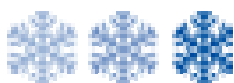
A well-stocked pantry, refrigerator and freezer are your life-lines in these cases. Here's your Plan B:

Before the party:

- * Stock your pantry, refrigerator or freezer well. A well-stocked kitchen allows you the flexibility to easily add another course to your menu, or substitute a course all together, such as soup or pasta. With staples on hand you can create additional hors d'oeuvres, stretch a salad course, or create antipasti or cheese plates effortlessly.

During the party:

- * Using smaller portions can extend your dinner service.
- * Add an extra course to satiate your guests if your event includes a sit-down meal. Soup is ideal for this. I always have *Alessi* Italian Soup packages on hand, and chicken stock. The soup comes together in less than 15 minutes. I swirl a bit of olive oil or butter into each bowl before serving, and no one is the wiser. I do the same with Pasta. Add wine, garlic, onions, and fresh herbs to a high-quality jar of Marinara sauce, and then serve with a grating of fresh, aged Parmigiano Reggiano.
- * Serve your meal family-style or as a buffet.
- * Use food-styling techniques if you have to transform take-out into your dinner service.



Basically, it comes down to your willingness to remain calm and get creative. Keep in mind that the *reason* for the event is to gather and enjoy the company of those invited. No matter what happens, the event can still be delightful and successful.

Secret #6. Arrive early; host yourself.

With each *secret* checked off your list, and your party about to begin, there is only one thing to do: Arrive at your party early – as your own guest. Indulge yourself and enjoy. Yes. The first guest to any party should always be the host. The simple fact is that until you arrive at your own party your mind-set is still on executing your plan. Even more so, every guest wants to be greeted by their host with smiles, and warmth. Not a hurried, harried, rushing, and overwhelmed person.

The only way to do this is to be ready to receive guests 20 minutes before the first guest is *expected* to arrive. It has become one of my own hard and fast rules of entertaining. Anything that isn't done can be delegated to the first guest that offers (as someone always does...). I promise if you do this only once, it will become a part of every party plan.

Yes. For 20 minutes before I welcome the first guest, I begin entertaining me. I enjoy a glass of wine, or a cocktail. I sneak a little bite of the food. I freshen up a bit. I take in the sights and enjoy the music. I put myself right in the middle of the party I am about to create. I think long, with gratitude, on the people that have agreed to join me and those that will be missed. I imagine what they will enjoy and what they will remember most about the occasion.

There is a sort of magic that you are able to create for yourself and, therefore, your guests, when you treat yourself as a guest at your own party. And, when you are a seasoned host, it is always endearing to invite a guest or two to arrive a bit early and share in that magic with you: "Would you like to stop by a few minutes early so we can visit before the other guests arrive and things get busy?" Then you will have no choice but to entertain yourself when they arrive.



Entertaining isn't difficult, and I don't think it was ever meant to be that way. When you've taken care to wrap all Six Secrets into your holiday hosting plans you will find that you can effortlessly host any type of party – with any number of unplanned surprises, disasters or interruptions. You will find yourself enjoying your parties, and wanting to host more. The truth is that most people want to believe you just pulled your brand of hospitality out of the proverbial bag. Whether you have or haven't, no one wants to know that you've been slaving for a week and are just too exhausted to enjoy yourself.

Forego what ever you must to keep your focus on the people you have invited. Celebrate being both a host and a guest, and with your *Six Secrets* close at hand, your holiday entertaining will be as memorable as the Season itself.

